

NCLIS News Release

**U. S. National Commission on
Libraries and Information Science**

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For Immediate Release

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Public Library Statistics: NCLIS Takes a First Look at Trends Affecting Libraries

Washington, DC USA, October 12, 2004 – The U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) today announced the beginning of an examination of trends affecting public libraries, using data recently recompiled by NCLIS. “Results of Analysis of Trends in Public Libraries, 1990-2002” can be seen at <http://www.nclis.gov/statsurv/NCES/plu/trends/trendresults.html>. These results come from data formerly available only as annual compilations.

The Federal-State Cooperative System (FSCS) program was started in 1987, with the objective of providing comparable data from the public libraries in the country. Now, with longitudinal files, trends affecting libraries can be examined. Robert Molyneux, Director of Statistics and Surveys at NCLIS, described the Commission’s new data files.

“We collect statistics to help us know where we are,” Molyneux said. “When our community leaders and, particularly, our national legislators need information about libraries and how good they are, or what makes them work well, they must have good statistics, and the statistics must capture trends across years. This new recompilation of NCES’s public library statistics enables us to do that.”

It’s what the library statistics program should do, according to Molyneux.

“I believe someone should be able to go through these data and unambiguously establish what changes have taken place in libraries over a period of time,” he said. “We’re trying to figure out the state of public libraries in America, and we need to be able to analyze data to give us an important part of the picture. Historically we have collected public library statistics to support decision making, budgeting, and planning. But these data can also be used to come up with a predictive theory for describing how libraries operate in their environment. Knowing that well would allow us to improve libraries and similar information agencies. Analyzing trends is a first step in the process of modeling libraries.”

Beth Fitzsimmons, the Commission’s Chairperson, agrees. Dr. Fitzsimmons, of Ann Arbor, MI, speaks enthusiastically about the Commission’s role in collecting statistics.

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“We are obliged to do this,” she says. “Measuring the quality of America’s libraries is part of our mission, and we must do it well. The legislation that created the Commission very specifically requires NCLIS to ‘appraise the adequacies and deficiencies’ of library services provided to the American people, and just recently the Commission renewed its commitment to appraise America’s libraries. Now that we are able to study trends across time, NCLIS is even better prepared to move forward with its appraisal and, as required by law, to provide policy advice to the President and Congress on matters having to do with libraries and information agencies.”

Trend analysis is a key component of the management process, and for questions about public libraries, the NCLIS web page provides useful information. The three variables analyzed so far indicate that for the large subset of all public libraries in this study, the years from 1990-2002 were good ones. Expenditures and staff increased, as did expenditures per capita. These expenditure categories also kept ahead of inflation. Given that this period was good economically and that public libraries rely on tax revenues and gifts and that both go up during good times, this fact is not surprising and is also consistent with the experience in academic libraries. On the web pages, general results of analysis on national-level data for staffing, staff per population, expenditures, and expenditures per capita are discussed, with links to more detailed information on the behavior of these variables over time. The pages will be updated as new analysis is completed.

The NCLIS statistics and surveys program is a collaborative venture with the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The two agencies work together in implementing the Library Statistics Cooperative Program, and NCLIS documentation is based on data provided by NCES, with the data available in a variety of formats.

NCLIS also serves as a liaison to the library community and advises NCES on policy matters. It is the goal of the joint program to plan, develop, and/or sponsor national sample surveys on public, academic, or school libraries and to assess their ability to meet current and future information access needs. At NCLIS, the goal is to compile, document, and analyze existing data sets – making the data usable for the library community – and to supply research results to the policy community.

About NCLIS

The U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) is a permanent, independent agency of the Federal government charged by Public Law 91-345 to advise the President and Congress on national and international library and information policies, to appraise and assess the adequacies and deficiencies of library and information resources and services, and to develop overall plans for meeting national library and information needs.

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